

Charting the Imperial Will

Colonial Administration & the General Survey of British North America 1764-1775

by

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ABSTRACT

CHARTING THE IMPERIAL WILL

Colonial Administration & the General Survey of British North America 1764-1775

This dissertation explores how colonial administrators on each side of the Atlantic used the British Survey of North America to serve their governments' as well as their personal objectives. Specifically, it connects the execution and oversight of the General Survey in the northern and southern theatres, along with the intelligence it provided, with the actions of key decision-makers and influencers, including the Presidents of the Board of Trade (latterly, the Secretaries of the American Department) and key provincial governors.

Having abandoned their posture of 'Salutary Neglect' towards colonial affairs in favour of one that proactively and more centrally sought ways to develop and exploit their North American assets following the Seven Years' War, the British needed better geographic information to guide their decision making. Thus, the General Survey of British North America, under the umbrella of the Board of Trade, was conceived. Officially sponsored from 1764-1775, the programme aimed to survey and analyse the attributes and economic potential of Britain's newly acquired regions in North America, leading to an accurate general map of their North American empire when joined to other regional mapping programmes.

The onset of the American Revolution brought an inevitable end to the General Survey before a connected map could be completed. Under the excellent leadership of Samuel Holland, the surveyor general of the Northern District, however, the British administration received surveys and reports that were of great relevance to high-level administration. In the Southern District, Holland's counterpart, the mercurial William Gerard De Brahm, while producing reports of high quality, was less able to juggle the often conflicting priorities of provincial and London-based stakeholders. Consequently, results were less successful. De Brahm was recalled in 1771, leaving others to complete the work.

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